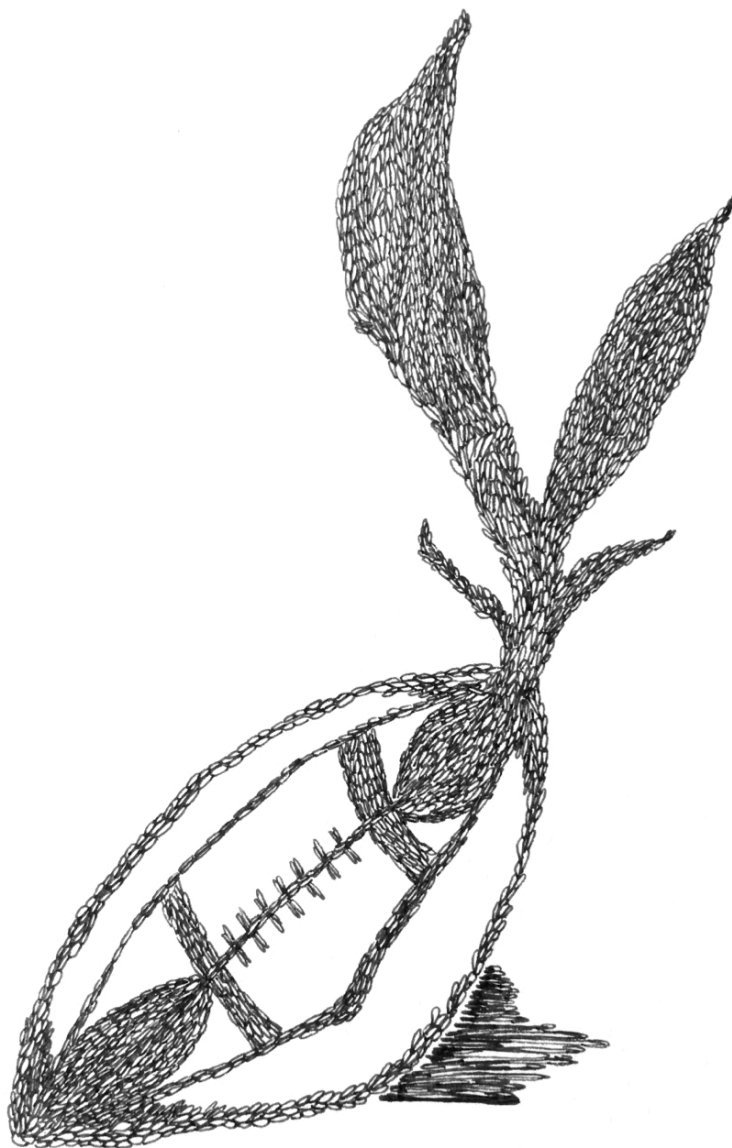


Heads & Shoulders:
Representations of Polynesian Men in the NFL



Heads & Shoulders:
Representations of Polynesian Men in the NFL

A PORTFOLIO PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
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IN PACIFIC ISLANDS STUDIES

By

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We Verify that we have read this portfolio project and that, in our opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a portfolio project for the degree of Masters of Arts in Pacific Islands Studies.

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Preface: Genesis of a Topic

Sometimes it is the things we find most puzzling that urge us to make sense out of them. The following is a conversation I had with a classmate named Jay. He insisted I try and explain my interest in the representation of Polynesian men in the National Football League (NFL). His curiosity was valid, though it would require more than I could explain in a few words.

Jay: Can I ask you what your family background is?

Christine: My mother was born in the Philippines and moved to Hawai'i in the 1960s. My father was the only child born to Filipino immigrants who came to Hawai'i to work on the sugar cane plantations.

Jay: Are you a Pacific Islander?

Christine: No.

Jay: That's cool. Do you like football?

Christine: Not particularly. Well, not really at all.

Jay: What? If you don't like football and you're not a Pacific Islander, how did you come to study Polynesian representation in the NFL? I mean, it's cool and all, but I'm just curious what *your* interests are here [in this subject area].

Below is an explanation for my interest in football. It is a nuanced response to my friend's question, a response I am able to provide now, but not then.

Football is not a sport I have an affinity for like tennis, which I played for over ten years. And yet, football was a staple of my childhood that made me feel alienated from my brothers. My preadolescent childhood was spent in futile attempts to emulate my three brothers. Although I was the youngest, I wanted to go where they went, wear their clothes, weight train, and hang out with them and their friends.

All the boys had favorite teams and players, watched games on Sundays and Mondays during the season, and played football at school with their friends at recess. When it came to football I knew my place, and it was outside. "You no can! You one girl!" They would shove me aside and speak their secret language and play their exclusive "boys only" game. Football was a common language between them and their friends. And I wanted in.

The other neighborhood girls were on the sidelines as well, so we created our own world that did not depend on or even acknowledge football. We rode bikes through the streets, picked wild mangoes, and orchestrated grand mud fights by carrying buckets of water into uninhabited lands nearby—life without football was not without adventure or action.

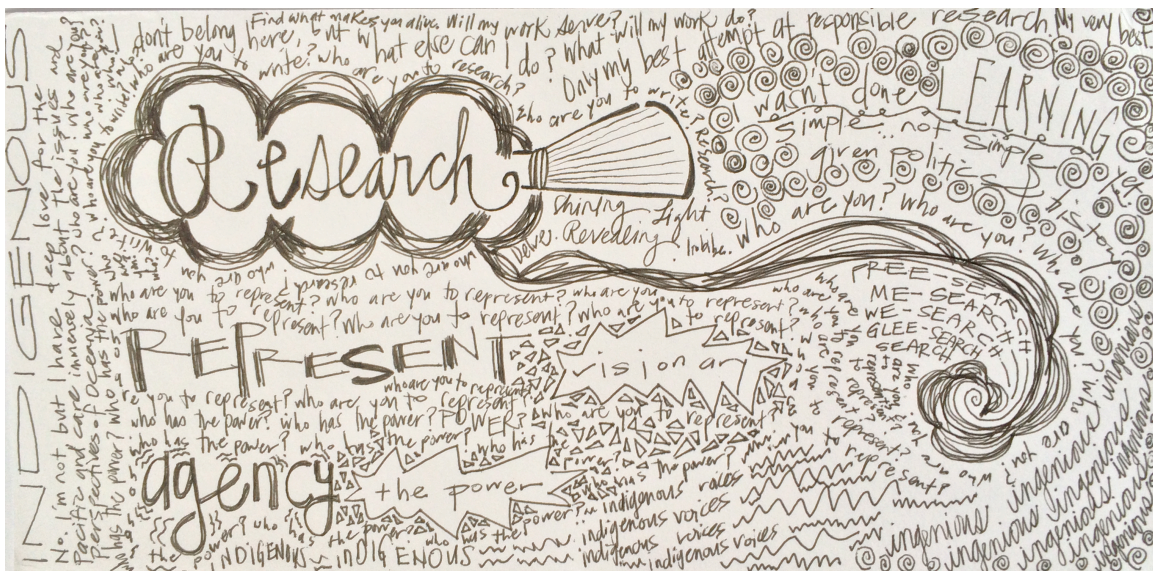
When we were covered in mud or high up in a mango tree laughing with sweet and sticky mango covering our faces, we did not mourn the absence of football.

In high school on Hawai'i Island, all three of my brothers played football. Two of their careers ended prematurely due to injuries. After their recoveries, they never played the organized form of the sport again. They were not being groomed to enter elite levels of college or professional ball, so they did not suffer a devastating loss. For them, the end of their football careers meant they played more soccer. Now that we are all grown up, my brothers stay connected through the common thread of football. During the season they exchange friendly text messages about games, statistics and fantasy football. However infrequent our family gatherings may be, they can still discuss season highlights or team rivalries. For the men in my family, football connects and for a woman the opposite is true.

In the year 2000, a new precedent was being established in the National Football League. Polynesians were coming to prominence. They were making a name for themselves in the league and prestigious colleges with famous football programs were seeking Polynesian recruits.

Media coverage began to follow stories about Polynesians in American football at all levels—high school, college and professional. Catchy headlines like “Football camp with Polynesian flair grows in size and prestige” (Zillgitt, 2008) indicated that Polynesians were making a growing impression on the game. The overwhelming media attention directed towards Polynesians left me asking more questions about the reasons behind Polynesian interest in football, how Polynesians were changing the game, and how the game was changing the Polynesians.

I enrolled in the master's program in the fall of that same year. As a graduate student, I was expected to produce my own original research. I understood that as a non-islander I had a particular responsibility. I not only had to produce original research, I was responsible for an outcome that would empower the people of Oceania. Handling my issues of positionality as an outsider proved to be nearly insurmountable. Piece 1 is a drawing that can be read as a concrete poem capturing my reservations about researching Polynesians in the NFL and the issues I wrestled with as double outsider, a non-Pacific Islander and a woman.



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representation, especially in visual media. On an interisland flight home to Big Island, I read, “Motu Football: Samoans Go Deep in the NFL” in the Hawaiian Airlines in-flight magazine *Hana Hou*. I showed the magazine to my mentor who noted that masculinity studies was a growing topic of interest in women’s studies.

Around that same time I started working as a tutor and mentor to student athletes in the Nagatani Athletic Center at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa’s athletic complex. I worked with a number of Polynesian football players who were referred to me because they were in danger of dropping below eligibility or were already on academic probation and working towards eligibility.¹ To my surprise, many of them were unable to read and write at the college level.² This was an indication that their previous educational experiences had somehow, in quality or standard, failed them. This structure could be related to their disproportionate participation in sports. It soon became apparent that most of these low-performing athletes were being assisted by an army of advisors and tutors to keep them eligible to play. I soon learned that the choice of sports over academics starts at a young age.

Between 2011 and 2013 I pursued a second bachelor’s degree in elementary and special education at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. This required me to spend considerable supervised time in public elementary schools throughout the island of O‘ahu. One of my semester placements was a third grade classroom of mostly minority students. They introduced themselves then told me about something they liked. Only

¹ The names and particulars of their identity have to be concealed, because of the terms agreed upon which were conditional to my employment. In addition, the Polynesian football players I worked with were self-identified to me and I did not have to solicit the information from them.

² As a student tutor and mentor to athletes I was privy to confidential academic information to stay up to date with student’s academic progress.

three of the sixteen boys in the classroom named something that was not sports-related. The majority of them liked football, basketball and baseball.

In a later assignment, students were asked what they wanted to be when they grew up. Ten boys wanted to be pro-football players, two wanted to be pro-basketball players and one wanted to be a pro-baseball player. Only three boys visualized a future outside of sports: an artist, a pilot and a chef. This was a reminder of how much value boys place on sports. This may be due to a lack of role models in other professions or the influence of sports marketing.

What is so desirable about the prospect of playing professional sports? Do children still play football in their backyard and basketball at the park thinking they are going to be the next superstar? Are kids so easily swayed by marketing? Regardless of the cause, the boys were spellbound by the power of sports stardom.

My project is an attempt to make sense of my personal experiences and critical engagements with representations of and interactions with Polynesian football players. The world of football is still foreign to me, like a language I studied for years but could not speak: yet this dissonance only intrigues me further. Hence this portfolio that I hope will satisfy my desire to understand what it is about football that fascinates me so.

Introduction: Guide to Reading

Before I begin, I want to bring attention to the title of this work, “Heads & Shoulders: Representations of Polynesian Men in the NFL.” Heads & Shoulders is a play on the shampoo company, Head & Shoulders for which Pittsburgh Steelers’ Troy Polamalu is a spokesperson. The idea is that the new wave of representations, the goal of my work, rests on the “shoulders” and in “heads” of the bright minds of not only football players, but of those with a genuine passion and love for Oceania, today and the future. Secondly, the way Polynesian men are often domesticated by the sport of football is often visible by the way their helmets domesticate their wild Polynesian hair just above their shoulders. These musings have been central themes in my exploration in topics of Polynesian representation, masculinity and culture.

The purpose of this study is to analyze national media representations of Polynesian culture and masculinity in American football. My aim is to deconstruct elements used to represent Polynesian masculinity as racialized and exoticized built on notions of a collective warrior culture, a propensity for violence and attitudes about the ideal native. These suggestive notions portray Polynesian masculinity as static. In contrast, masculinities are a social construction and move through time and space, influenced by broader economical, historical and cultural factors (Hokuwhitu 2004, Jolly 2008, Tengan and Markham 2009). The objective of my portfolio project is to disrupt my own assumptions about the complexity of Polynesian presence in the National Football League (NFL). My specific interests are not confined to the professional levels of football, but consider the formative years and how the sport shapes the world of young men in high school and even college football. An examination of underlying messages of

dominant representations is an attempt to better understand their implications on Polynesian masculinity, cultural flows and perceptions of Polynesians. This analysis will be conducted within a historical, cultural-political and socioeconomic framework revealing the conditions that normalize dominant representations.

My sample is comprised of a variety of personally selected news articles, television and radio broadcasts and commercial advertisements where the focus is on Polynesian men in American football from the years of 2000-2010. I chose not to focus on a single media modality, because I thought it would not give a well-rounded view of the media landscape during the particular time period. By this time period, Polynesians were already a well-established success phenomenon in football. The presentation of Polynesian football players in national media outlets assumes ignorance of the broader audience, which often explains the use of trite stereotypes. Paul M. Kellstedt (2003:14) explains the use of media as a knowledge base, “The news media are a powerful tool for social learning ... and particularly so in the case of the race. Americans learn about racial groups—in particular, what members of other racial groups ‘are like’—from a variety of sources.” News representations are consumed as information and are considered to be viable resources for learning, especially when it comes to race.

The creative component of my portfolio is my artistic exploration of the major themes of representation as major theme intersects with notions of masculinity, power and culture. I am interested in the way art communicates messages in a visceral way that can contribute to alternative ways of looking and seeing. The three main goals of my art pieces are to reinforce my arguments, illustrate ideas and visually interpret literature. Art pieces are embedded throughout the text as integral elements of my ideas and arguments.

The pieces include drawings, manipulated advertisements and images intended to be both satirical and provocative.

Throughout this paper I use the term Polynesians. This term is highly charged with colonial undertones since the distinctions of Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia were not created until after foreign contact. The majority of NFL players of Polynesian heritage are Sāmoan, but there are a number of Tongans, Hawaiians and even a few Māori that play or have played in the NFL. Many national media representations fail to account for differences between Polynesians and football players of Sāmoan, Tongan or Hawaiian heritage. Although they have many cultural similarities and distinctive differences, they are often broadly called Polynesians. I will continue to use the word Polynesian to broadly describe Pacific Islanders in the NFL to be consistent with usage in the mass media. However, I contend that this is a loaded term. In the NFL, Polynesia is over-represented by Sāmoans, Tongans and Hawaiians, even though there are more islands and indigenous people in Polynesia, that make up that area of the wider region of Oceania.¹ In other words, Polynesia is comprised of more islands and cultures than one would suspect according to dominant media representations of Polynesian football players in the NFL.

My analysis of Polynesian masculinity is thematic and includes topics of domestication, agency and victimhood. These topics can become problematic and complicated through the study of various representations to either support current debates or see the issue in a new way. What if Polynesian men were not at the mercy of media

¹ I preference the term Oceania to refer to the wider Pacific region in the same fashion encouraged by Epeli Hau'ofa, in his seminal essay "Our Sea of Islands." The term Oceania is imbued with a interconnected and empowering ideology.

conglomerates or removed from power positions that provide opportunities for self-representation? If we look at the NFL as a stage and the players as performers, what are the ways that Polynesian NFL players are flipping the script? From one angle, national media portrayals of Polynesians in the NFL appear to further relegate Polynesian men and make them seem homogenous. One can argue that warrior stereotypes further colonize Polynesian men and define them only in terms of physicality. Another perspective reveals that Polynesians are exploiting the advantages of stereotyping for size, speed, and strength. They are capitalizing on the opportunity to make money, travel, support their families and represent their people. The “exploitation” goes both ways. Each side is getting something that benefits them based on need.

Before I introduce Chapter 1, I present a short background on football in Oceania and in the United States. Chapter 2 discusses the domestication of the Polynesian body. In Chapter 3 I discuss issues of representation through the case study of Troy Polamalu because of his high visibility in football and marketing. My conclusion highlights the influence of two seminal essays, “Towards a New Oceania” by Albert Wendt (1993) and “Our Sea of Islands” by Epeli Hau‘ofa (1994) to explore the positive aspects of Polynesian participation in football. Each chapter uses artwork to explore ideas and highlight certain important points.

Chapter 1

Background: Football in Oceania

Beginning of Football in Oceania

The National Football League's (NFL) official website indicates that modern American football evolved from rugby in 1869 and its first rules were not made official until 1876. Joel S. Franks' article (2009:2398), "Pacific Islanders and American Football: Hula Hula Honeys, Throwin' Samoans and the Rock" chronicles the history of American Football in Oceania. It indicates that, "In the last decades of the nineteenth century, American football was supposed to be played by middle- and upper-class young men for a middle- and upper-class audience." American Football in its early stages was an elitist sport only for privileged participants and audiences. Franks also writes that football was dedicated to enlivening manliness, which was publicly endorsed by President Theodore Roosevelt who "thought it would work very nicely as the moral equivalent of war, so that privileged young men could truly acquire manliness just as their fathers did during the Civil War" (2009, 2398). The violent nature of the sport was intentional and encouraged.

Football navigated its way into Oceania in the last decades of the 19th century. In Hawai'i, grassroots teams shaped football's beginnings. The localized football culture was rooted in the indigenous and plantation worker communities. Football became an outlet for plantation workers and indigenous men distinctive from the structure of the plantations (Franks, 2009).

Football has been in Oceania for over 100 years. By 1903, there were three organized teams of eleven players each on the island of O‘ahu, Hawai‘i. The three teams were Kamehameha School, Oahu College (later University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa) and Honolulu High School (later McKinley High School) (Franks, 2009). There is no official record of the inception of American football in American Sāmoa, but it is surmised that Sāmoans learned football from the United States Navy personnel who played sports recreationally at the Pago Pago base prior to the 1950s (Tengan & Markham, 2009:2416). Sāmoan scholar Fa‘anofo Lisacaire Uperesa (2010:154) said, “Football is a sport played and rooted in areas touched by American sovereignty, and is nearly absent in independent Samoa where the dominant professional and amateur sport is rugby.” The connection between imperialism and American Football was evident in the onset of its introduction to American Sāmoa given that it was introduced to the indigenous people by the United States military (Markham 2003).

The Power of Football Marketing

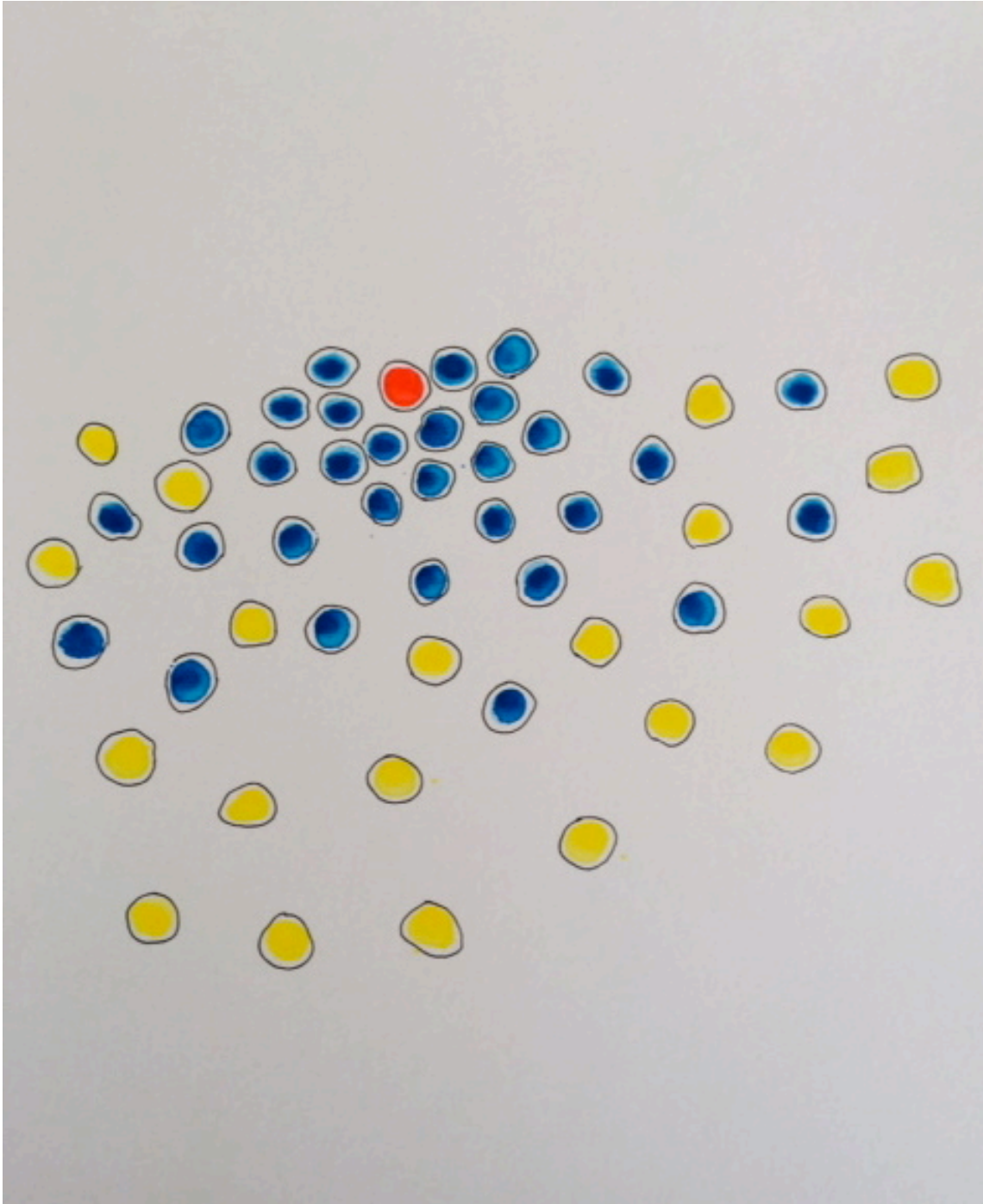
Since the 1970s football has become a multi-billion dollar industry with millions of obsessed fans. The NFL’s success comes from its ability to market its products, including its televised games (Fainaru & Fainaru-Wada, 2013). Football players are not only athletes; they are a part of a larger narrative, told in media that is told surrounding the sport.

The major news broad casting stations and national newspapers create narratives and marketing that play on the imaginations and emotions of fans. Since the first NFL broadcast of a live game in 1970, the NFL has become expert in crafting narratives to

garner massive audiences. The league and supporting media networks created a spectacle that fans identified with and developed an insatiable craving for. Football was not only a show on television, it was an event that became a cultural staple (Fainaru & Fainaru-Wada, 2013). Today, football has a cult-like following. People not only watch games throughout the season, but pre- and post-game shows, play fantasy football and follow up-and-coming college players.

Polynesian Presence in the NFL

Today, there is about one Polynesian per team in the NFL; this is represented in Piece 3. The 2012 Racial and Gender Report Card for the NFL developed by The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) found that “69% of all players in the NFL are black. 30% of all players are White. 1% of all players in the NFL are either Pacific Islander, Latino, or Asian American” (Lapchick, Costa, Sherrod, & Anjorin, 2012:30). The TIDES 2012 report is in close agreement with findings on my list of Polynesians on the 2013 NFL player roster. Piece 3 is a visual rendering of the ethnic distribution of an average football team according to the percentages in the TIDES 2012 report: one Polynesian (red), thirty-one African Americans (blue) and twenty-one white players. If Piece 3 were duplicated thirty-two times and placed in a grid, it might represent the ethnic distribution of the entire league. This would give the viewer a sense of how likely it is to garner a coveted spot on a professional football team in the U.S.

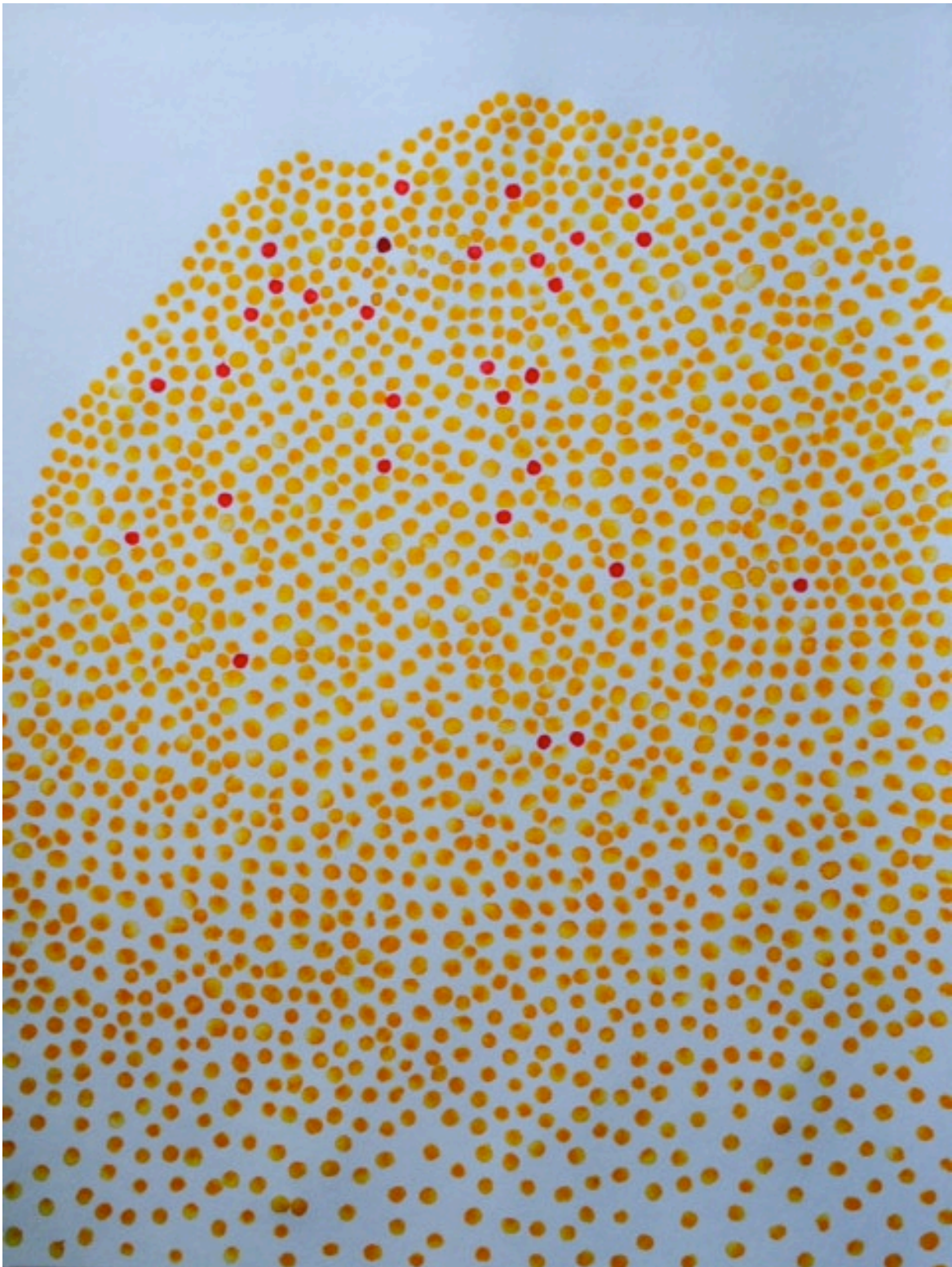


Piece 3: On Average [Watercolor crayons and black ink on paper]

Many articles featuring Sāmoan, Tongan and Hawaiian men make it sound as if the odds of getting into a school through a football scholarship, or extending their career to the next level, professional football, are in their favor. My list contains only thirty

Polynesian players on the 2013 rosters (see appendix for list of starting players) out of 1,696 players, about 1.8%.¹ In Piece 4, the red dots represent Polynesian players and the orange represent all other nationalities in the league. The presence of Polynesians is emphasized, but there are contrasting opinions about the number of Polynesians in the league. Co-founder of the Polynesian Football Hall of Fame, Jesse Sapolu, estimates that there were sixty Polynesians on NFL rosters by the 2013 Super Bowl (Field, 2013). This could be because players without native names go unaccounted for, or they are of mixed ethnicity and identified as something other than Polynesian, or that there are players employed by a team for practice purposes that cannot be listed on the team rosters. Another explanation is that the Polynesian presence is inflated to encourage success in young men through the success of others that went before them.

¹ Please see the appendix for further details regarding the list of Polynesians in the NFL for the 2013 season. The list I compiled may not include all starting players because of certain limitations.



Piece 4: Chances Are [Watercolor crayons on paper]

The presence of Polynesians often sends a message to that subtly implies Polynesians are exotic, yet Americanized, and fulfilling the American notion that hard workers will reap rewards. Carefully crafting Polynesians as friendly football warriors embodies narratives of Polynesians as non-threatening yet still discernibly exotic and unlike the average American. Polynesians have used sports as a means of mobility and a viable source of income. However, national media representations of Polynesians do not represent indigenous realities and can be limited in scope and interpretation.

Chapter 2

Domestication of the Polynesian Body

Football's Modern Warriors

During colonization of Oceania in the 19th century, Oceania was a site of domination by colonization. Since many political and social systems have been changed by Western powers, public desires and fears have created a desire to understand how Polynesians have been tamed, subdued and assimilated into societal roles. Before football, “The tourist industry in the Pacific also capitalizes on the native warrior as a romantic though peripheral icon—with carvings, photographic images and live performances of war dances and chants” (Teaiwa, 1999:252). Advertising and marketing play a critical role in shaping American attitudes and ideas about Polynesians. The narrative of the Polynesian football warrior has helped Americans understand the integration of the islanders into U.S. culture and society.

Polynesians have absorbed the narrative that their new battlefield is modern sport. Combat sports such as rugby and football are not just games; they are compared to battlefields and present an image of the Polynesian as a warrior. “Football players and spectators alike use performances of Polynesian warriorhood to make claims to an ‘authentic’ pre-colonial and pre-modern masculinity” (Tengan & Markham, 2009:3). This helps explain the popular use of the *haka* in combat sports, which will be explored later in the paper.

Māori scholar Brendan Hokuwhitu (2004:259) links perceptions of Māori physicality to colonial discourses,

In the 19th century Māori masculine physicality was, like the untamed countryside, something to be conquered and civilized; in the twentieth century it was something to be harnessed to provide manual labor for New Zealand's developing colonial nation; in the twenty-first century it has become a spectacle played out by the overachievement of *tāne* (Māori men) on the sports field.

Masculine representations take shape in the Polynesian warrior. This shift explains how Polynesian men's physical prowess can be utilized to support colonial interests. In New Zealand Polynesian physicality was for "manual labor" and in the U.S. football is one of the most visible ways.

Most Americans have limited contact with Polynesians other than in national broadcasts or advertisements. Advertisement and marketing in Hawai'i played a powerful role in informing Americans about the place and people of Hawai'i at the turn of the century. "What little they knew about Hawaiians would have come through visual and verbal representations (including tourist advertisements), as few Native Hawaiians have visited the United States" (Desmond, 1999:40). "The news media are a powerful tool for social learning. This is true generally and particularly so in the case of race. Americans learn about racial groups—in particular, what members of other racial groups 'are like'—from a variety of sources" (Kellstedt, 2003:14). With Americans becoming familiar with Polynesians through football representations, they begin to form ideas about Polynesians. On the subject of pirating the Polynesian body, Lisa Uperesa provides perspective on the Sāmoan body specifically. She argues,

The apparatus of global sport has most visibly appropriated the Samoan body as a commodity...In this appropriation the constant invocation of the warrior marks difference in cultural, racial, gender, and temporal terms, thus producing a new

opportunity for consuming Samoanness in an economy of fantasy...The Samoan football player is presented as a modern-day warrior, and in the context of the sport the difference that he embodies is not only domesticated, but rendered pleasurable and valuable (Uperesa, 2010:137).

The image of the Polynesian football warrior is symbolic and helps to explain a growing and distinctive Polynesian presence on the US mainland. It also reduces fears about Polynesians, such as being godless heathens or cannibalistic natives, which were once implied during the 19th Century to support colonial takeovers. Today, their status as professional football players or entertainers maintains their status quo as jocks or working-class laborers. Hyper-masculinity on the football field teaches people about Polynesians regardless of their personal contact with them or their knowledge about Polynesians. There is a comfortable boundary between experiencing the other and being fully enmeshed and becoming entangled with the other.

Colonialism in American Football

Sports have been used in colonization efforts globally, from rugby in New Zealand to cricket in India. In *Modernity at Large* Appadurai (1996:93) says, “Although there was never a conscious policy in regard to the support of cricket by the colonial regime in India, cricket evolved into an unofficial instrument of state cultural policy.” Further, cricket was regarded “as the ideal way to transmit Victorian ideals of character and fitness into the colony” (1996:93). Similarly, football is not just a game. It has its own culture and value system the players must align with to be successful as a team member and as a component of the larger playing community.

As an institution, football has provided a wealth of success to some and left a positive impression of Polynesians on the global sports community. Polynesians play sports all over the world, from Jonah Lomu, a Tongan playing rugby in France to

Konoshiki a Sāmoan in sumo wrestling in Japan. Polynesians are a much desired presence on sports teams and their reputation as professional athletes has provided international opportunities.

White men are still the nucleus of the sport as owners, head coaches, trainers, administrators and quarterbacks and the structure of football is similar to that of colonial societal stratification. The colonial relationship of Western powers as parents and indigenous peoples as children has been recreated in the coach (dominant) and player (submissive) roles. Players are expected to take orders from their coaches and other team superiors and follow the team as a small part of a larger unit. Polynesians in the NFL are still confined to playing defensive positions, and there is a complete absence of Polynesians in high-ranking coaching positions.

Tom Goldman of National Public Radio (NPR) news explains that the thick Polynesian build is “perfect for the trenches” (Goldman, 2009). Polynesians are recruited for size and strength, which explains why there have been very few Polynesian quarterbacks of note and only two Polynesian quarterbacks since Jack Thompson in the 1980s and Marques Tuiasosopo in the early 2000s.

Polynesians are touted as having the perfect body types (big, tall, muscular) for defensive players and are hardly venerated for their intelligence or refined skills. Most defensive positions are not as highly paid or revered as other glory positions, which involves throwing or catching a winning pass. When defensive players make a name for themselves it is because of their passion, fearlessness and ability to attack. Defensive players are not typically glory players—they are not throwing touchdown passes or

making long yardage running plays. The most celebrated defensive players are those who are relentless in their efforts in every play like Junior Seau and Troy Polamalu.

Haunani Kay-Trask, a Kanaka Māoli scholar and activist, explains the process of relegating Polynesians into defensive positions as a process that happens globally at many levels through the process of colonization. The “economic ghettoization” that indigenous people experience because of marginalization makes Polynesians “a semi-skilled” labor force for haole capitalists. In football, the linemen or defensive positions are analogous to the semi-skilled labor force that Trasks alludes to (Trask, 1999:93).

Sports for the Good of the People

In media representations of Polynesian athletes in football, they are represented as having limited options to climb the social ladder. The Pittsburgh strong safety, Troy Polamalu, tells CBS news anchor Scott Pelley (2010), “Just like any marginalized ethnic group, you know, if you don't make it to the NFL, what do you have to go back to?” Polamalu adds that many Sāmoans think of football as their “meal ticket” and access to higher education. The director of Utah’s Pacific Islanders Affairs describes football as “the classic means to an end” (Goldman, 2009). To the parents and youth in American Samoa, “a football scholarship is perceived as a free ticket off ‘the rock’ and a way to receive a college education” (Markham 2003). Additionally, the benefits of football support the immediate and extended family.

It is easy to disguise economic distress and limited educational opportunity under the facade of multi-million dollar success in football. It puts the onus of opportunity more on the community than on the accountability of governing powers. The image and

narrative of success gets played up but is not a realistic option to the majority.

Educational opportunity is seen as a viable future for Polynesians, where they use of their bodies to gain an education.

Poet and teacher, Tafea Polamalu, is the brother of the Pittsburgh Steeler's, Troy Polamalu. In Tafea Polamalu's (2010:160) poem "Daddy Said" he captures the wishes of a struggling immigrant Sāmoan father that only wants the best for his child's future.

Through the poem, we get a sense of his father's aspirations for his son after taking many risks to come to the U.S. It is worth quoting the poem at length to get an idea of his father's perspective of American culture, economic opportunity and Sāmoan assimilation.

Daddy Said

*Son,
I prunk you hea
pecause tis is ta lan of
opprotunity*

*In Samoa,
te is nofing
To you heard me Son?
nofing*

*Hea in Ameika,
ta worlt is at
you finka tip
and ta sky is ta limits*

*You know why I nefa
teach you Samoan Son?
cause Samoan no ket you
anyfing in life*

*tis is ta white man's worlt
an Enklisch is
only fink tat matta*

You heard me Son?

*Tis is ta white man's worlt
An at ta en of ta tay, we all haf
to walk fru his toor*

*look at me,
my whole life i strukle wif
fo try to speak ta Enklish*

*i strukle my ass off Son
so tat you can ket you
pestes echucation*

*So i make tamn sure
My sons masta Enklish
pecause tis is what pestes*

*You see what I'm said Son?
Tis is why it pisses me when
te say, 'How come I nefa teachet
you speak Samoan?'*

*What ta hell te fink I prunk you here fo eh?
Tes stupit hets know
Nofing apout Samoa*

*Remember sumfing Son,
Ameika is ta pestes place in ta worlt
so ket ta echucation*

*pe ta tocto
pe ta lawya
tis is my tream fo you
tis is why fo i prunk you hea*

*for to kif you ta
opportunity to haf ta
fings i nefa haf*

You see what I'm said Son?

*Okay, koot talk
Alu su'esu'e
Ko prush ta teef
an to ta maf homewok*

Tafea Polamalu's poem is an indigenous response to expectations of the American dream and captures a familiar narrative of many immigrant families that come to the U.S. in hopes of a "better life" in comparison to the world they left behind. One message that the father is trying to relay to his son is that he has made sacrifices for his child to have a better quality of life. What is most striking to me is that his father does not limit his vision of success for his son only to the football field; he can be a doctor or a lawyer. This is contrary to the many voices of Polynesians that encourage others down the line to take advantage of the football opportunity. The father expresses a view that Polynesians, or specifically Sāmoans in this instance, can imagine a life for their children beyond the football field.

Football has been viewed as a saving grace for Polynesians, especially those from American Sāmoa and Hawai'i. In American Sāmoa, tuna canneries and the federal government sustain the local economy; in Hawai'i, the tourist industry supplies low-paying jobs. Neither of these offers a livable wage. Football becomes the avenue to a quality of life or the means to keep young men off the streets and out of gangs. Unfortunately, there is little discussion that addresses the societal infrastructure that allows limited access to a better life. There is also little investigation to what causes the desires of a so-called "better life" and how that often encourages the people of Oceania to leave their motherland. Anthropologist Niko Besnier explains, "the migrant professional athlete is the object of multiple expectations, demands, and hopes, many of which have little to do with sport and everything to do with kinship, communities, congregations,

villages, and the state” (Besnier, 2012:500).¹ Polynesians play football as individuals on a team but are a part of a much larger unit that includes their family, extended family, churches, communities and people. They take pride in their culture and heritage. Football is more than an opportunity to make money; it is a way to create a path for the next generation of players and to give something back.

Athletes feel compelled to play not only for personal success but also for their families and pride in their heritage and culture. In this interpretation, Polynesian men in football support the community by providing a way for cultural traditions to be practiced in modern settings. Samoan men engage in football while maintaining diasporic relationships through *mālaga* and *vā*.² Individuals are not seen as separate units or aloof. Instead, they are critical components to a larger group or extended family (Tengan and Markham 2009, Lilomaiava-Doktor 2009, Uperesa 2011). Yet football—and the media machine that drives and supports its popularity—has made a profound impact on this cultural exchange and on the perceptions of Sāmoans.

Economic opportunities in Polynesia are limited and many young men in Samoa believe they must either aspire to football stardom or enlist in the military. Stereotypes of a Polynesian tendency toward violence have cast a negative shadow on Polynesians in the U.S. It makes them prime candidates for contact sports and military recruitment. These combat outlets are perceived to be channels for their constant, yet contained violence. Unfortunately, there is a dark side to the military pathway, American Sāmoa leads the

¹ Although I find his interpretation interesting, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

² *Mālaga* means two-way travel. *Vā* means social space. See Lilomaiava-Doktor 2009 for further discussion of *malaga* and *va*.

nation in the most casualties per capita. They have even surpassed Yap, which has lost soldiers at a rate five times the national average (Nobel, 2009). Other opportunities for education and economic advancement are out there, but they are not advertised in the pervasive quality as football. Ma'ake Kemoeatu says, "I would love it if more Polynesian kids aspire to be doctors, lawyers, singers and songwriters. But for now it's football" (Corbett, 2013). Perhaps what Kemoeatu is hinting at is that Polynesians are using football as a pathway to greater opportunities.

Football is an American sport that attempts to erase its racist foundations by emphasizing its willingness to integrate an array of ethnicities. The emphasis on exotic Polynesian qualities is a way of satisfying American desires for engagements with "the other." They see long hair, and long names and imagine Polynesians navigating their way across the pristine sea to an idyllic paradise and living there until the game of football graced their balmy shores. The exotification of Polynesian football players is an extension of the deep-seeded Western fascination with the other. Feminist scholar bell hooks (2012) explains the purpose and effects of othering in the media:

Within the current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference. The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.

The broad support for Polynesians in the NFL makes it seem as if their presence is widely accepted. Franks (2009:2410) insinuates that the success of Polynesian men in the NFL has come with a price. He concludes his article by gravely stating, "They have

been recruited to inflict and accept great and sometimes devastating bodily harm. One hopes that it has all been worth it.” According to Frank’s comments, he implies that Polynesian men have made sacrifices to be in the NFL, but what sacrifices have they made? And does it only come at the expense of Polynesian men? In the highly competitive game of football there are always winners and losers.

Self-Representation and Indigenous Rights

The opportunity and entitlement to self-represent is essential in the healing process of decolonization. “Indigenous communities have struggled since colonization to be able to exercise what is viewed as a fundamental right, that is to represent ourselves ” (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999:150). What are the ways some Polynesians have used football to create alternative representations of their people? “The representing project spans both the notion of representation as a political concept and representation as a form of voice and expression” (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999:150). There is an urgent need for self-representation both politically and expressively. It allows indigenous people to engineer their own realities and construct kingdoms of creative culture that are expressions and extensions of their ancestral mindset, worldview and epistemology.

Participation in American football helped make Polynesians citizens of the world. They have used this opportunity to relocate, travel, network and create opportunities for self-representation. The drawing of the coconut morphing into a football on the cover page, “Sprouting Cocoball,” and the coconut in Piece 5 play with the idea of agency. In the essay “Representations of Cultural Identities,” Rotuman scholar and filmmaker, Vilsoni Hereniko (1999) discusses the symbolism of coconuts and Pacific Islander identity. Coconuts were and continue to be an essential plant with wide ranging utility. I use the similar symbolism to compare the football to a sprouting coconut. Now the football, curiously shaped like a coconut, is symbolic to the ways Polynesians have engaged in the sport. It has become sustenance as they used it to travel to new land, adapt to new environments and create opportunities in places away from home.



Piece 5: Self-Sustaining [Pastels on paper]

Polynesians are exploiting their reputations as warriors to their advantage. Through football, islanders have used their reputation as big and intimidating people to garner the attention of national football scouts for college and professional levels of play. It has become commonplace to hear Sāmoans and Tongans aligning their identities with stereotypical notions of Polynesians. Henderson (2011:291) explains,

There may appear to be tangible economic benefits, in the form of legitimate security work or through informal or extralegal avenues, for those considered physically intimidating. Many Samoan men are well aware, even critical, of societal scripts, but nevertheless play them out of a sense of economic necessity.

The Polynesian stereotypes produced by mass media are often echoed by Polynesians, but this strategy has proved to be a successful opportunity to capitalize on those stereotypes to their advantage. Once they are employed by the NFL they find that there is another dimension to the wild warrior. If they remain wild, meaning acting outside the acceptable expectations of the league, they are then domesticated through fines and reprimands.¹ In essence, Polynesian men play into the wild warrior image to get into the league and then must abide by NFL codes of conduct to remain in the league.

Representing (Alternative) Realities

Representations are always an indication of some kind of reality. Additionally, “Communication takes place within a matrix of shifting power relationships. This process is enmeshed with ongoing struggles to establish, maintain and resist power relationships” (Louw, 2001:211). Any text or image can be read, decoded, and interpreted for meaning. Audiences are not passive in the process of receiving information or

¹ See Dominik Raiola fines in 2008 and 2010 for inappropriate gestures and verbal exchanges with fans and Rey Mauaunga was fined in the form of two game checks in 2010 after driving under the influence of alcohol (DUI).

reading into representations, in fact people can “creatively construct cultural meanings, contest dominant forms, and create alternative readings and interpretations” (Kellner & Durham, 2012:xxxiii). Although the sender may wish a certain message be conveyed, the one received by audiences may not always match up. “Decoding/reading can be just as biased, partial and skewed as encoding/media production. Readers, after all, engage in any decoding process with the preconceived pictures in their head” (Louw, 2001:209). This is a reminder that not only is a bias involved in the production of representations but is evident in the decoding and reading processes as well.

The rise of the Polynesian football stars like Junior Seau, Troy Polamalu and Haloti Ngata in addition to the ratio of Polynesian players per capita, has led to more pervasive images and narratives of the players. No work of literature or art is completely innocent or objective. The audience has agency, and that creates the expectation that the audience has the power to reject or support prejudicial or stereotyped representations (Kellner & Durham, 2012). However, sometimes the representations are layered in meaning and audiences may need to be guided in the decoding process. Analyzing the construction of these media representations in text and image allows audiences to consider the authors’ subjectivity when they highlight representations as cultural productions. Often the realities and (mis)conceptions of the producers are revealed rather than those of the subjects that are being portrayed.

Tui Alailefaleula a former defensive lineman from American Sāmoa considers, “Maybe it’s the sport we are born to play” (Miller, 2000). Any mention of Polynesian success in football warrants a discussion of being “born to play” as if football is in their blood, coming from a warrior tradition, loving to hit, enjoying the physicality of the

game, having respect and obedience, being highly coachable and taking advantage of a rare and prestigious opportunity. This can be read as people thinking football abilities can be linked to genetic coding of football aptitude, enhanced by cultural norms of Polynesians. The claims of Polynesian culture being equivalent to the principals and ethics of football are an American diffusion and attempt to simultaneously assimilate and exoticize Polynesians. Simply transposing cultural principals such as *fa'a Sāmoa* and *faka-Tonga* and attaching them to the upward trajectory of Polynesians in football is an oversimplification.

Invoking Smallness

Invoking a sense of smallness has only made Polynesians bigger in name and ability. As the late Epeli Hau'ofa, Tongan teacher, writer and anthropologist argued before (1994:152), “Smallness is relative.” The downsizing of the people, population and homelands simultaneously occurs with the supersizing of their notoriety as well-rounded football players and people as suggested by former University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa football coach, Rich Miano in the film “Polynesian Power” (Spear & Pennington, 2005). Without the simultaneous belittlement that accompanies discussions of their achievements, their sports feats would be too spectacular to justify domination.

The work of Sāmoan scholar, writer and artist Albert Wendt has reminded me to see the space of Oceania as boundless. Wendt describes his home, the expansive world of his ancestors as, “So vast, so fabulously varied a scatter of islands, nations, cultures, mythologies and myths, so dazzling a creature, Oceania deserves more than an attempt at mundane fact; only the imagination in free flight can hope—if not to contain her—to grasp some of her shape, plumage, and pain” (Wendt, 1993). Wendt denotes Oceania as

a powerful place, not a small speck waiting for football to rescue her. With this perspective, football becomes a point of entry into higher occupational echelons. Hau'ofa (1994:160) declared

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces that we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed places, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom.

The world that Wendt and Hau'ofa illuminate and people that come from this magnificent region are not frail victims of limited opportunity falling to the mercy of powerful corporate interests. People of Oceania are resilient and courageous voyagers of their ever-expanding world, pushing boundaries and testing the limits of the human spirit. Exploration of the world of football is an extension of this boundary-pushing in a modern context. Pieces 6-9 are celebrations of these concepts. Piece 7 captures the porous boundary between land and sea that allow Pacific Islanders to feel comfortable voyaging, even if it is no longer by double-hulled canoe.



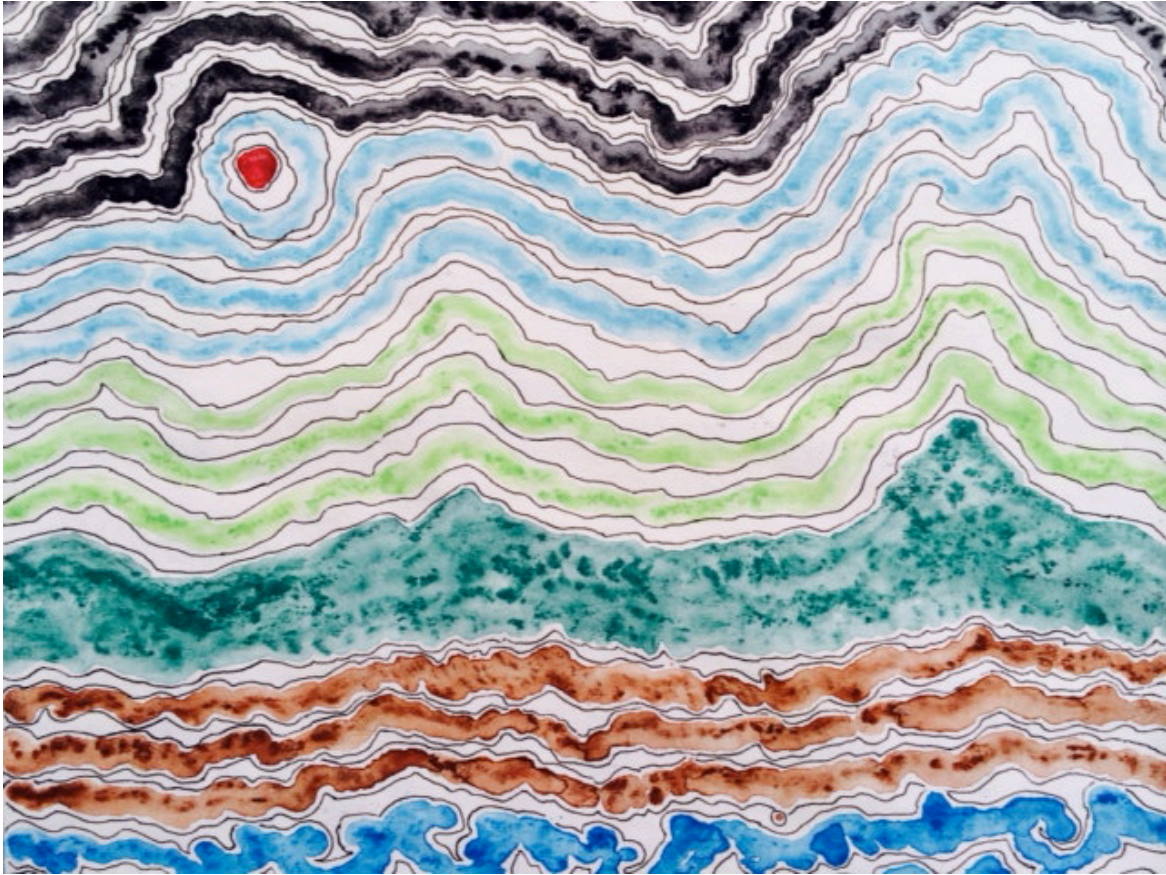
Piece 6: Expanding Oceania [Pastels on paper]



Piece 7: In Flow [Pastels on paper]



Piece 8: Land, Sea, Sky [Pastels and color pencil on paper]



Piece 9: Wanderlust [Watercolor crayons and black ink on paper]

Stereotypes of a Polynesian propensity for violence produces negative public impressions of Polynesians outside of football—within the realm of football, violence is acceptable and encouraged because it is contained and controlled violence. They are safely viewed at a distance by a spectator, but otherwise publicly viewed as big and scary.

The stereotypical notions of Polynesians exploit essentialist ideas like Polynesians are naturally endowed with athletic prowess and are more adept at defensive positions because of their violent warrior nature. In the Hawaiian Airlines magazine cover story, *Motu Football: Samoans Go Deep in the NFL*, writer Liza Simon (Simon, 2007) interviews a group of high school football players and asks if there is interest in being a quarterback. One player responded, “carrying the ball is too boring for a Samoan.” Then

they all added, “We like to hit” (Simon, 2007) The young men sound as if they are preparing for the positions that they will most likely be offered, should they make careers out of the game.

Mass media’s macro-effects influence the status quo in order to “maintain existing structures and behaviors” (Johnson-Cartee, 2005:8). Questioning the purpose behind media images provides us with a sense of what is normal, acceptable, and appropriate, albeit a distorted perception of reality. We are inundated with images and narratives and should critically ask ourselves if they are positive, uplifting, and empowering worldviews of the people they seek to represent. A re-evaluation of the effects of the supposed Polynesians’ penchant for violence should be carried out for the sake of the future and life potential of Polynesians. Hokuwhitu (2004:262) draws on the work of Homi Bhabha and explains, “Colonialism requires a limited system of representation or ‘regime of truth’ concerning minorities, because allowing them self-determined individuality would undermine justifications for colonial rule.” It is by dominating the representations set forth that Polynesians are made to feel insecure, strange or inadequate.

Although I problematize Polynesian representation in news and advertising, I do not suggest they are victims of football. I fully support the rights of indigenous people to represent themselves. Polynesian football players are not to blame for taking part in the game. The issue is that news and advertising representations play on stereotypes, making it the responsibility of media production sources to create responsible representations and for the general public to be informed about media literacy. Polynesians in the NFL do not forego their agency just by being players alone. They have built their bankrolls on those

reputations. Tongans playing rugby in Japan are able to create “income-generating opportunities on a scale unheard of in Tonga and among most overseas Tongans (generally garnering them, in U.S. currency, low- to mid-six-figure yearly salaries)” (Besnier, 2012). Football has awarded Polynesians with many opportunities economically and socially, but there are physical trade offs to the game as well.

The Reality of Post-Concussion Issues

The NFL has come under fire as a class action lawsuit of over 4,400 former players and their families have sued the league for misleading players and withholding information about post-concussion conditions. Post-concussions issues and long-term brain damage are of the utmost concern among the NFL, players (current and former), parents and even the United States Congress. Given the popularity of the game it has become a public health concern. The post-concussion debate is highly controversial because there is a lack of consensus amongst researchers about the interpretation of various studies.

In the past decade neurologists have studied the degenerative brain disease Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, more widely known as CTE and its range of symptoms from dementia, increased irritability, memory loss and depression,. They have found that the multiple concussions, even those of minor severity, sustained by football players in practice and games are directly linked to CTE. Football players who sustain injuries are still allowed to continue playing. CTE, however, is degenerative, its effects may take years to develop and the wide spectrum of symptoms is difficult to treat. Post-concussion related mental and physical health issues have directly impacted the community of Oceania, because it lost one of its most lionized players, Junior Seau, to

related issues that took over his public and private life. He went from one of the league's most venerated players to CTE's poster child.

Research on CTE is growing and with that, the concerned voices of former players, the wives of former players, and parents are gaining public recognition. Regardless of the momentum towards change, even from within the league, in the way football is played Michael Messner (1992) believes that "It is extremely unlikely that a public illumination of the relational and health costs paid by male athletes will lead to a widespread rejection of the sport by young males... Though athletes may recognize the present and future health costs to their athletic careers, they are likely to view them as dues willingly paid." If Messner is correct, then the forthcoming information about the effects of CTE will not deter young Polynesian men from choosing the football path, even with Junior Seau as the premium example of the life-threatening effects of CTE. This only increases the need to have conversations about what other options Polynesian men have to receive a quality education or to work towards a job that sustains their families, extended and immediate. The reality is that the risks of the game are challenging the rewards; spectators will soon see how this battle "plays out."

Chapter 3

Polynesian Masculinity: Representations in News and Advertising

Football and the Warrior Ideal

Language used to describe Polynesian football players often idealize them as fierce players with the build and attitude of warriors. Sports journalist, Ted Miller in the ESPN article “American Football, Samoan Style” says, “Samoans once were known as fierce warriors who practiced cannibalism. Now they take their aggressions out on the football field, and they do so with uncanny power and skill due to a potent brew of genetics and culture” (Miller, 2002). Miller attempts to explain Sāmoan success in football through history and culture, while naturalizing the Polynesian body. In National Public Radio’s (NPR) *All Things Considered* segment “Young Polynesians Make a Life Out of Football” Goldman likens the featured high school football player, Thomas Hamilton, to a “modern-day warrior” and details how he “crushes his way through practices and games” (Goldman, 2009). Hamilton sounds as if he revels in violent recklessness and emphatically agrees, adding that what he loves about football is, “Just hitting and making the other person cry, it’s just so amazing” (Goldman, 2009). The warrior mentality is proliferated in the media and Polynesians ascribing to those attitudes is a byproduct of the media propagation and reinforcement of the warrior.

Football capitalizes on the sense of innate fierceness that places Polynesians on a pedestal. Their media-created reputation works to their advantage since football players are thought to be big, tough and manly—that is the nature of the game. What people

really love about the game is the action, the brute force behind this hard-hitting contact sport. Toughness is an ideal associated with masculinity—Polynesian men are perceived as able to endure tremendous physical pain without complaint. One method of emphasizing the warrior-like qualities of Polynesians is the performance of the Māori *haka*, which is thought of as a war dance. Wira Gardiner (2007: 11) explains that the “war dance” definition is erroneous but understandable given the contemporary non-Māori perception of *haka* performances by the New Zealand rugby team, the All Blacks, and other international sports teams. “The haka has come to symbolise the power of the All Blacks and their place in world rugby” (Gardiner, 2010:92). Other sports teams have attempted to use the *haka* to create the same effect in masculine competitive imagery that the All Blacks have been so successful in doing. This performance gained national visibility in two American broadcasts: a “60 Minutes” special called *Football Island* (in association with CBS) and the film *Polynesian Power* (commissioned by Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN)). The performance of a *haka* in these two broadcasts sets the tone for the warrior image.

Polynesians have been widely embraced as college and NFL football recruits because of their reputation as big and strong yet friendly and disciplined players. Gonzales notes, “The Samoan Dolphins are aggressive on the field but friendly off it. Between thundering hits they keep things relaxed, joking with each other in Samoan to annoy other players and coaches” (Gonzales, 2007). Gonzales attempts to build on the warrior reputation while balancing it with a “friendly” or relaxed attitude off the field.

Former NFL quarterback Marques Tuiasosopo spoke about the Sāmoan success in football and attributed it to an unwavering mindset nurtured by their unique cultural upbringing.

There's an attitude in our culture. I go back and look at pictures of great-great grandparents and they were wearing ceremonial clothes. They battled other cultures and maybe that's been passed down through the years. It's in the blood, an attitude when they go out there. Off the field—I can't speak for a particular person—but in general, they're quiet, don't like to bring attention to themselves. But get into a competitive situation and it's like Jekyll and Hyde—it's fierce (Garber, 2002).

Tuiasosopo draws on the connection between the battlefields of the past and the present to establish a continuum of a warrior's life and highlights the dichotomous nature of the warrior in which he is expected to be strong and simultaneously quiet.

Tuiasosopo hints at two ideas: the first idea is that the instinct or inclination to battle is something that was passed down through generations; the second is that these instincts are only activated in a “competitive situation.” He plays up their potential aggression but anchors it firmly to the football field. This concept suggests that Sāmoans still have the violence within them but have reconciled the urges with the safe outlet of football. His comments are directly aimed at Sāmoan male football players, but his words capture how Polynesians are frequently represented in football. In short, the warrior has been domesticated and has domesticated himself through football.

The Polynesian Manly Man

To date, every gay player in the NFL has waited until retirement to reveal his sexuality. There have only been six players brave and courageous enough to “come out.”¹ Football is highly associated with masculinity. It even controls the expressions of sexuality of their players. NFL veteran, Esera Tuaolo (2006), confirms that locker room banter usually involved masculine assertions, talk about sexual conquests or anti-gay remarks. In personal communication with Sāmoan poet and former football player, Tafea Polamalu remarks,

homophobic and misogynistic rhetoric seemed to be a very natural part of locker-room jargon throughout all my years of playing sports. The locker room is the antithesis of politically correct; especially regarding gender roles. For the most part, ignorance and epithets regarding sex and gender go unquestioned and unchecked in locker rooms, so it is a safe haven for homophobic and misogynistic behavior.²

Polamalu paints the picture of football dynamics off the field in their most intimate space, the locker room. His perspective affirms that American football has no tolerance for homosexuality on the field or behind closed doors; it hurts the macho male image.

Indigenous masculinity is altered through the representations of Polynesian men in the NFL. It is cleaned up and organized within the context of sports. Other ways of being men and expressing masculinity are deemed deviant. Indigenous male identity is cleaned and packaged for the American public by streamlining its appearance and expressions of masculinity within the context of the NFL.

¹ Michael Sam, selected in the final round of the 2014 draft by the St. Louis Rams, was the NFL’s first openly gay player. Sam’s historic entry into the league is significant but the exploration of what this means for masculinity and sexuality in the NFL is beyond the scope of this paper.

² Email correspondence with Tafea Polamalu, September 7, 2010

Hegemonic masculinity excludes transgender or homosexual males and is disassociated from representations of Polynesian men. Any deviations from the norm are rendered invisible by complete exclusion. In fa‘a Sāmoa, however, alternative expressions of gender are embraced. An example is the *fa‘afafine*. According to Schmidt (2010) fa‘afafine are included in nearly all aspects of Sāmoan life.

The Sāmoan word ‘fa‘afafine’ literally translates as ‘in the manner of’ or ‘like’ – ‘faa’ – a woman or women – ‘fafine’. Fa‘afafine are biological Samoan ‘males’ whose gendered behaviors are feminine. Although this can be understood as a ‘traditional’ identity, the ways in which fa‘afafine express their femininity varies in both aspect and degree, and has shifted across time and space. Fa‘afafine (and other transgendered populations) are both exceptional, in that they challenge normative western understandings about relationships between sex and gender, and at the same time ordinary and remarkable, in that they do this through the same process everyone uses in constructing and performing gender” (Schmidt, 2010).

Fa‘afafine do not fit into hegemonic notions of femininity or masculinity in the Western American context, but in Sāmoan culture they are well recognized and play vital sociocultural roles. Regardless of the high number of Sāmoans playing professional football, this kind of gender liminality is non-existent in the NFL.

The Many Faces of Troy Polamalu

Troy Polamalu is an American-born Sāmoan. He was born in California and raised in the small blue-collar town of Tenmile, Oregon. In college, he played football for the University of Southern California Trojans. In 2003 he was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers and has become one of the best safeties to ever play the game.¹ Troy

¹ Troy Polamalu recently extended his contract with the Pittsburgh Steelers through 2016 purportedly surpassing the team salary cap of 10 million dollars.

Polamalu's skill on the field and his humble demeanor have made him one of the most admired and venerated players in the league. Aside from his athletic accomplishments he is well known for his philanthropic generosity and his involvement with aspiring young football players and U.S. veterans. He has organized football training camps in Sāmoa, donated sports equipment to high schools in American Sāmoa, and he and his wife are the founders of the Troy & Theodora Polamalu Foundation. He is beloved by Americans and Sāmoans alike.

Currently in the NFL there is no other player that epitomizes the idealized Polynesian football player like Troy Polamalu. He is *the* embodiment of the Polynesian warrior on the field, but is always humble, composed and soft-spoken off the field. The next series of pieces explore the multiple facets of his image.

Pieces 10 and 11 are attempts to take Troy Polamalu out of his familiar context of warrior and experiment with his tough football player persona. The question in Piece 10, "Isn't it?" is a play on the 2009 Super Bowl commercial from Head & Shoulders. Piece 10 is a way for the persona of Troy Polamalu to talk back by saying, "Is it really *all* about my hair? Are you reducing my individuality or who I am to an object? To my hair?" He is asking people to think of him as more than just his great head of hair or his endorsements with Head and Shoulders or his glamorous image.

In a post-game interview in the Steelers' locker room, still in uniform and dirty from the game, and the interviewer says, "I'm here with Troy Polamalu. Tell us about the goal line stand."¹ Troy turns around to grab the bottle of shampoo and with a slight smile, he says, "Well, I owe my great hair to Head & Shoulders. It's for more than just

¹ Is an attempt or a series of attempts made by the offensive line to score a touchdown from a short distance in one or more plays.

dandruff.” The interviewer hesitantly says, “That’s not what I asked Troy.” Troy looks directly into his eyes, puffing his shoulders a little bit and asks, “Isn’t it?” The interviewer says no at first, but after Troy asks a second time, he looks more directly into the interviewer’s eyes with a menacing stare. His eyebrows narrow and a deep, serious line forms in his forehead. As if afraid, the interviewer looks down and away, giving in, and says, “Yes.” Then the camera cuts away.



Piece 10: All About the Hair? [Pencil and oil pastels on paper]

Piece 11 explores the polarity of the representations of Troy Polamalu. In many advertisements he is a brutal football player and a soft-spoken, humble man. However, it is his image as a football player that is the selling point of his persona. Often in advertisements, Troy Polamalu *the football player* is used to sell products (like the 2009 Coke Zero commercial) whereas Troy Polamalu *the man* is used to advocate for issues. He is usually marked as a hard-hitting football player by wearing his uniform, even in settings where he would otherwise be in plain clothes or by placing him in the football field or locker room. His football connection is also revealed in his actions by tackling someone or having an intimidating stance. His quiet nature is usually captured within the same advertisement to again highlight the duality of the warrior image. The attention brought to Troy Polamalu's hair could be interpreted as feminine. The feminine attention brought to his hair is extinguished by the dominant attention brought by his masculine attributes. So although Troy and his million-dollar insured hair can be seen as a feminine signifier, it goes unquestioned because of his standout masculine qualities. "Behold beauty and the beast" is written arching over Troy Polamalu's helmet bringing their attention to the two main ways Troy Polamalu is represented and how he is dichotomized in media.



Piece 11: Beauty and Beast [Pencil and oil pastels on paper]



Original photograph found at
http://nflphotostore.nfl.com/nflphotostore/afc-print/troy-polamalu_90026.cfm
Accessed on May 13, 2014

During the process of creating Pieces 12 through 14 of Troy Polamalu, I asked the questions, “What happens when you remove players from their macho personas? How can I alter these photographs to call attention to their masculine signifiers then turn them on their heads”? Piece 12 in particular is an exploration in the blending of gender signifiers, using feminine signifiers such as a pastel or pink color. I tried to use unexpected color schemes or layered the stereotypical male images with stereotypical feminine markers. In doing so, I want the viewer to take notice of the effects of using stereotypes to evoke gender-specific traits and behaviors. In the creation of these pictures I wanted to see if masculine images still uphold the same notions about masculinity when they are draped in feminine qualities? How do the feminine markers distort messages about masculinity? Pieces 13 and 14 are altered images that use unexpected color

schemes to see if Troy Polamalu still maintains his toughness even when he looks silly or playful. How does the image or persona of Troy Polamalu change with blue hair and a blue beard or clown red hair and pouty red lips? I wanted to explore the use of unexpected colors and highlights to change his easily recognizable features.



Piece 12: Tutu Troy [Oil pastels on paper]



Original design found at
<http://brandlegendary.com/troy-polamalu-clothing-line/>
Accessed on May 13, 2014



Piece 13: Blue Troy [Pastels on paper]



Photograph found at
<http://www.steelersgab.com/2013/08/29/video-head-shoulders-for-men-troy-polamalus-hair-preview/>
Accessed on May 13, 2014



Piece 14: Red Troy [Pastels on paper]

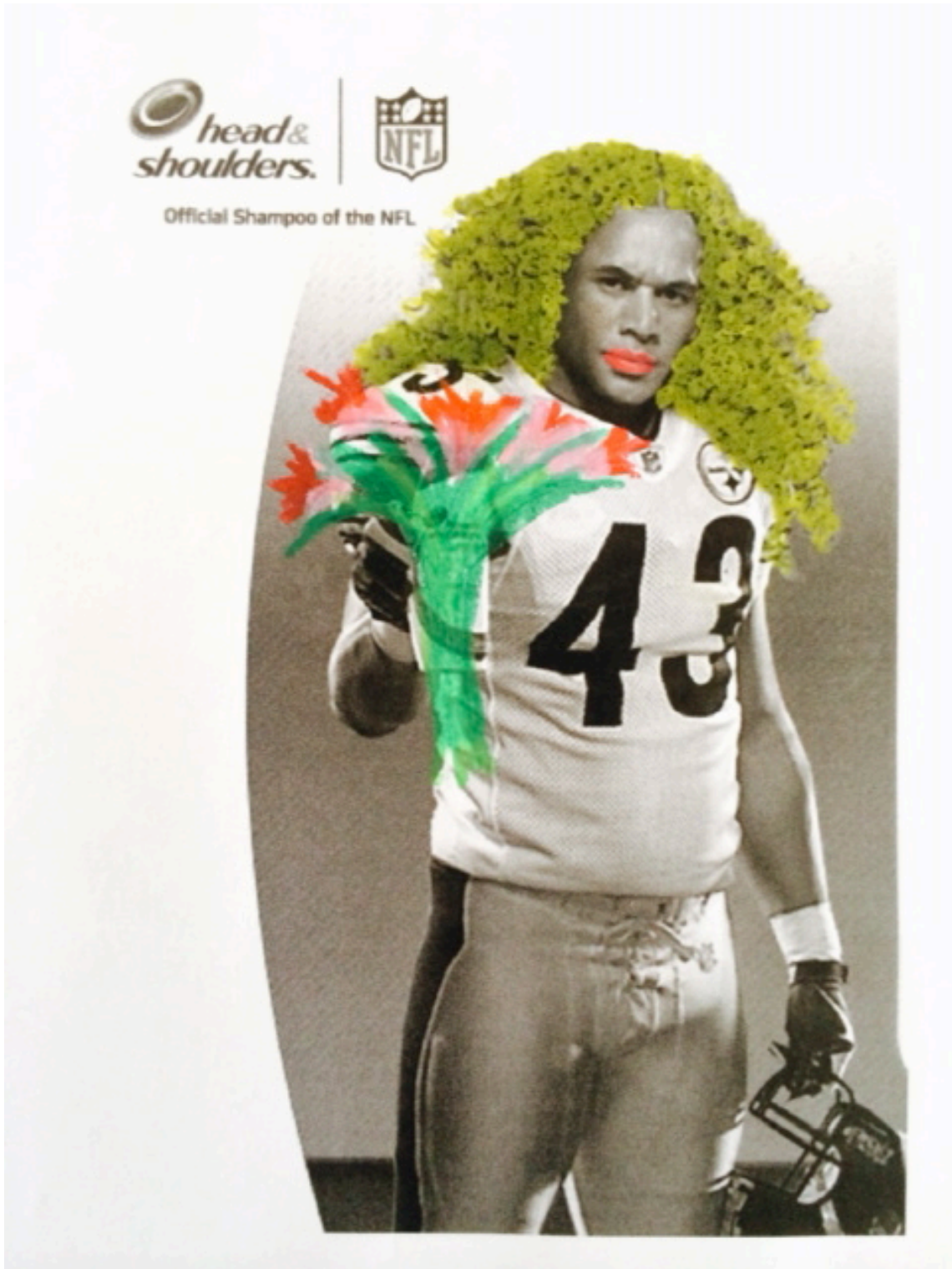


Original photograph found at <http://www.gq.com/sports/profiles/200609/troy-polamalu-pittsburgh-steelers-super-bowl>
Accessed on May 13, 2014

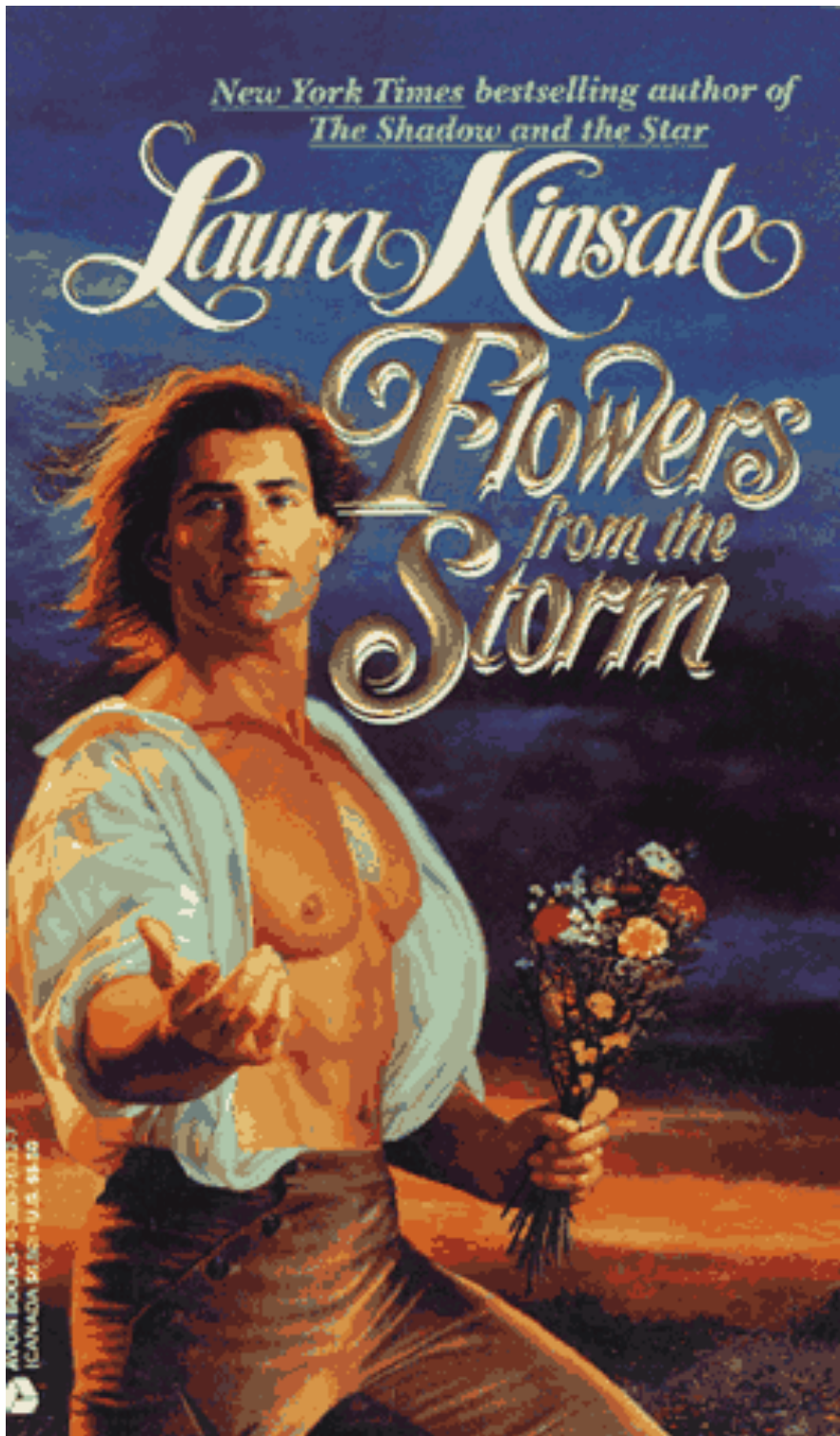
Piece 15 is an alteration of an original Head & Shoulders advertisement, the official shampoo of the National Football League, in which Troy Polamalu is donning his full football uniform and poses with a bottle of the shampoo. He puts on his clean Steelers uniform with a serious look on his face and a furrowed brow as he gazes deeply into the camera as if to intimidate his audience into using the shampoo. My changes to the advertisement were made to enhance Troy's features so that they resemble the covers of romance novels. I attempted to downplay his masculine side, while bringing out his more feminine features, making them look similar to Fabio.¹ The use of making his curly hair yellow and adding a tint of red to his lips were intended to romanticize his figure. As I masked his masculine features by adding hints of color and using his open gesture to

¹ Fabio is a model made famous for his long blonde hair and chiseled physique, which was popularized through the covers of romance novels and advertisement campaigns such as "I can't believe it's not butter."

offer flowers instead of shampoo, I tried to make him seem more inviting instead of intimidating. He is using his intense stare and muscular physique in his football uniform to in.



Piece 15: Romance Novel Troy [Oil pastels on paper]



Photograph found at
<http://www.likesbooks.com/covrcol1.html>
Accessed on May 13, 2014



Official Shampoo of the NFL



Advertisement found at
<http://operationonceinalifetime.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/partnership.jpg>
Accessed on May 13, 2014

Another effort to soften Troy's image is Piece 16. I wanted to make him look more like a comic book hero instead of a brute football player. Prior to my enhancements, the picture still had a lingering toughness about it. First, I copied the picture in black and white and then bronzed his skin. When I used pastels to soften some of his facial edges by highlighting them with color, the background color made it seem like he was surrounded in super-hero magic. The burst of color is supposed to give him warmer energy and intensity that was not in darker original picture.



Piece 16: Comic Book Troy [Pastels on paper]



Photograph found at
<http://standingosports.com/main/2013/09/19/pittsburgh-steelers-rumors-troy-polamalu-cut-hair/>
Accessed on May 13, 2014

Troy Polamalu is a dynamic player on the field and in images and representations of him. My pieces of Troy Polamalu, using or inspired by altered photographs and advertisements, were intended to play with and pick apart some of the marketing techniques and media representations of his highly popular image. His qualities can be played up as masculine or feminine depending on the gender signifiers used, facial expressions, and the surrounding environment. Images and messages are crafted and created then delivered to an audience. These pieces were meant to call attention to how an image or photograph can be shifted using a prop, or with a change in color or texture.

Conclusion: Beyond Representation

Representations, like the ocean, are fluid and forgiving, expansive and powerful. My work is a snapshot of representations at a given time. During this time, the representation of football players perpetuates stereotypical notions of Polynesians, subverts alternative modes of masculinity, creates gender inequality and entices Polynesians to “bet the farm” on temporary jobs in the NFL. If life is not one single narrative, then why should we always have one narrative that dominates Polynesian men?¹ Why is the story of the Polynesian warrior the one that is relentlessly retold? Should his journey about getting off the rock, obtaining an education and rising to fame and wealth be the story that is uncritically popularized? How can Polynesians move forward when anchored to a stereotype that was used to oppress and negotiate terms that surrendered their power and their lands?

Football has the potential to provide success and pride amongst many Polynesians. On the flip side, football is a dangerous sport that is strongly linked to brain damage valorizes institutionalized violence and perpetuates many negative stereotypes about Polynesian men.

I have long been inspired by the work of Albert Wendt and Epeli Hau'ofa, who encouraged the people of Oceania to decolonize the region by recreating their world. In the following poem, I specifically address the concept of movement through migration, where migration becomes an extension of their ancestors' movement. The desire to move

¹ For more about the power of stories in native cultures see Thomas King *The Truth About Stories*.

around and discover new lands is the same desire football players have, but in a modern context.

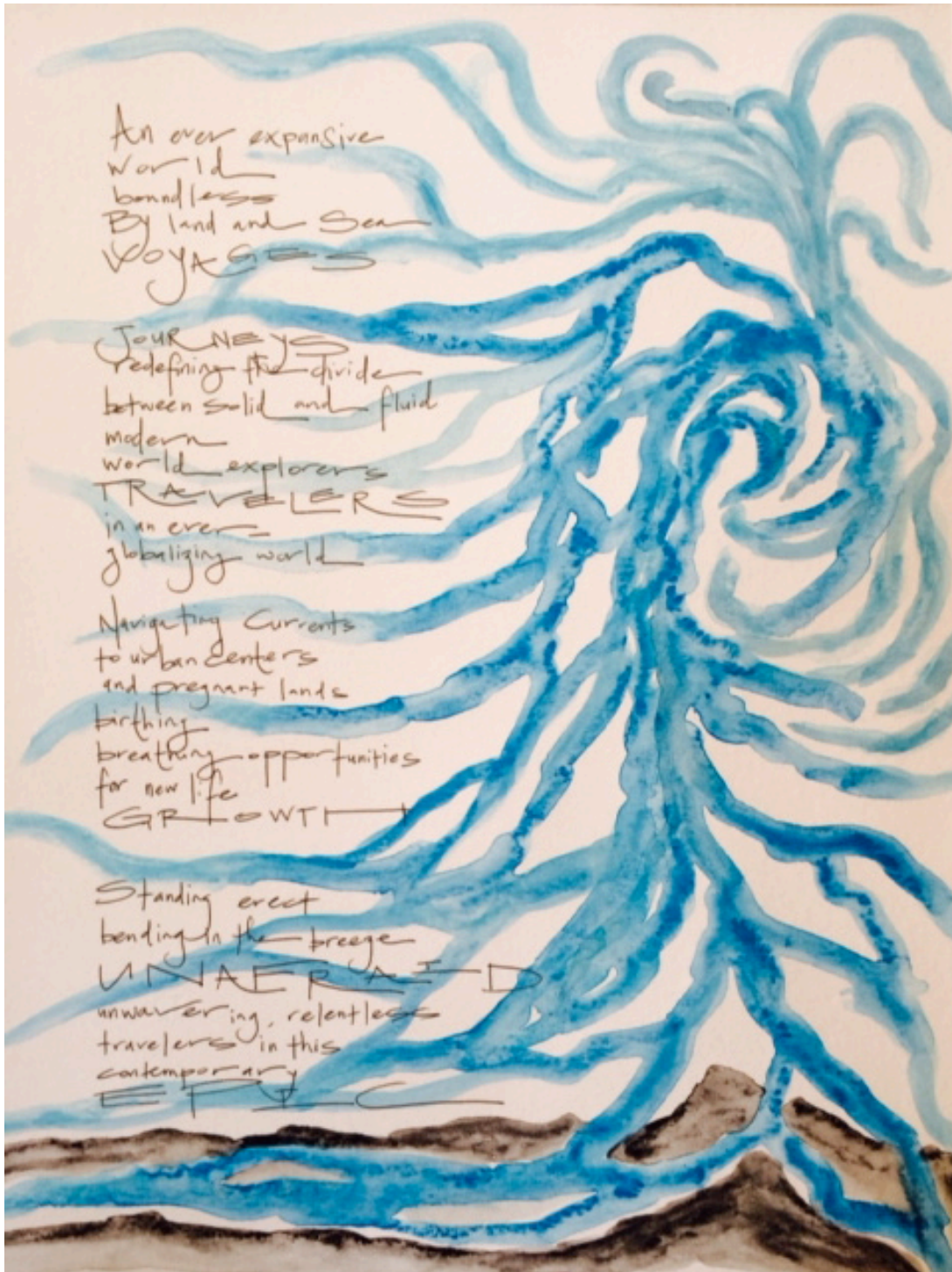
Epic Travelers

An ever expansive
world
boundless
By land and sea
VOYAGES

JOURNEYS
redefining the divide
between solid and fluid
modern
world explorers
TRAVELERS
in an ever-
globalizing world

Navigating currents
to urban centers
and pregnant lands
birthing
breathing opportunities
For new life
GROWTH

standing erect
bending in the breeze
UNAFRAID
unwavering, relentless
travelers in this
contemporary
EPIC



Piece 17: Epic Travelers [Watercolor crayons and black ink on paper]

My aim is not to encourage the end of all football opportunities and programs.
Rather, I am looking for more variety in cultural representations and economic

opportunities. The stereotypical representations I included in this paper are tired and old, as they are based on colonial modes of seeing the people of Oceania. I believe there are more ways to represent the Polynesian man and athlete. There are more ways to lionize men in a culture than by their athletic achievements or their threatening body mass and its potential for harm. What about a young Polynesian using his competitive edge in academics to propel an athletic career? Where are the compelling stories about the young Polynesian man that is making a positive impact on his community through service? By studying this topic I have had the honor of being introduced to numbers of young Polynesian men that are challenging the stereotypes with futures in academic research, the arts and law.¹

Encouraging football is not wrong but there must be equivalent support and an insistence that students have alternative paths of success and achievement. If we want to inspire kids to get an education and give them a purpose to score high on the SATs, then we should not do so conditionally upon the promise of football. Education is a privilege, right and responsibility of all youth and that should be our main focus. Collectively, if we are passionate about education, empowering colonized people, and decolonizing mobility, we can begin to redirect our efforts towards providing Polynesians with another outlet for achieving this elusive “American Dream.” This outlet should not compromise their bodies and physical well being.

If we believe in the abilities of Polynesians beyond their physical capacity then we can support options other than getting into a Division I school and playing for the NFL. Jobs in the workplace or in academia may not offer mega-million dollar contracts,

¹ *Sāmoans: Global Citizens* is a visual anthropological book that captures the wide range of Sāmoan citizens around the world and the wide variety of occupations they have.

stellar networking capabilities, and national fame, but they can offer a safer, more sustainable profession. If this is true, then why are so many young men encouraged to play football professionally? Young people can play football and still strive for academic achievement. Education is not only a ticket off the rock, it is financial security, personal satisfaction in a career and a chance to represent their community.

Epilogue

On the cover of this thesis proposal is the last art piece I created for my portfolio. I wanted to capture the coconut as a new metaphor that symbolizes the power of football in Polynesian communities. The “Sprouting Cocoball”, as the last image or art I created, represents a shift in my thinking after the bulk of my project was completed. Initially, I thought that many Polynesians were being coerced into playing football as a diversion away education. This purposeful steering away from education was something I perceived as larger social systems trying to maintain the status quo by keeping the oppressed marginalized in physical realms, like football.

Eventually, I came to recognize other aspects of the game and learned that football was not something “happening to” Polynesians, but something Polynesians were consciously engaging in and developing indigenous responses to. Polynesians rally around football as an avenue towards education, wealth and pride.

The engagement of Polynesians in football can always be traced back to the community and the heritage and roots of the players. The “Sprouting Cocoball” is a way of drawing a physical connection to that space. Polynesians are now known as more than friendly or lazy natives in a passive paradise. Instead, they are a presence to be reckoned with on the American gridiron. The sprouting coconut is a symbol of football as a potential for growth while the seed evokes a sense of rootedness. The “Sprouting Cocoball” is emblematic of Polynesian access to education, wealth, travel and overseas opportunities; it is a symbol of sustenance.

Appendix

List of Polynesians on 2013 Roster

To estimate the number of Polynesian football players active in the NFL in 2013, I looked for Polynesian last names among the 53 players on each of the 32 NFL teams. I found the names on the NFL's official website, and then cross-checked them using Wikipedia on Super Bowl Sunday, February 2, 2014.

The list includes first and last names of players, the team they played for during the season, position played, where they are from, and/or where they graduated from high school and ethnicity, if available.

My list only includes starting players that were identifiable by last name and may be limited or incomplete, because of Polynesians with non-Polynesian last names due to mixed ethnicity.

With this method I estimated that 30 out of the 1,696 players (~1.8%) on the 2013 roster were Polynesian. For comparison, a demographic study by Richard Lapchick found that less than 2% of all NFL players in 2011 were Polynesian (Lapchick et al., 2012), which is in congruence with my findings.

1. Haloti Ngata Baltimore Ravens NT (nose tackle) from Oakland, CA
2. Domata Peko Cincinnati Bengals DT (defensive tackle) from LA, CA
3. Troy Polamalu Pittsburgh Steelers SS (strong safety) from Garden Grove, CA
4. Shiloh Keo Houston Texans FS (free safety) from Bothel, WA
5. Fili Moala Indianapolis Colts DE (defensive end) from Anaheim, CA
6. Samson Satele Indianapolis Colts C (center) from Kailua, HI
7. Tyson Alualu Jacksonville Jaguars DE (defensive end) Honolulu, HI
8. John Lotulelei Jacksonville Jaguars DE ILB (inside line backer) Kihei
9. Will Taufoou Jacksonville Jaguars FB (full back) from Redwood City, CA
10. Ropati Pitoitua Tennessee Titans DE (defense end) from Sāmoa
11. Tony Moeaki Buffalo Bills TE (tight end) from Wheaton, IL
12. JJ Unga Buffalo Bills T (tackle) from Rochester, CA
13. Koa Misi Miami Dolphins OLB (offensive line backer) from Santa Rosa, CA

14. Paul Soliai Miami Dolphins DT (defensive tackle) from Santa Ana, CA
15. Michael Hoomanawanui New England Patriots TE (tight end) from Normal, IL
16. Isaac Sopoaga New England Patriots NT (nose tackle) from Pago Pago, American Sāmoa
17. Sealver Siliga New England Patriots DT (defensive tackle) from West Jordan, UT
18. Sione Fua Denver Broncos OG (offensive guard) from Lodi, CA
19. Kaluka Maiava Oakland Raiders OLB (offensive line backer) born in Honolulu, HI graduated from Baldwin High School on Maui
20. Mantai Teo San Diego Chargers ILB (inside line backer) from Laie, HI graduated from Punahou High School
21. Stephen Paea Chicago Bears DT (defensive tackle) born in Auckland New Zealand graduated from Timpview HS in Provo, UT
22. Dominic Raiola Detroit Lions C (center) from Honolulu, HI graduated from St. Louis
23. Levine Toilolo Atlanta Falcons TE (tight end) from San Diego, CA
24. Star Lotulelei Carolina Panthers DT (defensive tackle) from Tonga graduated from Bingham High School in South Jordan, UT
25. Kealoha Pilaes Carolina Panthers WR (wide receiver) from Honolulu, HI graduated from Damien High School
26. Daniel Teo-Nesheim Tampa Bay Buccaneers DE (defensive end) born in Pago Pago, American Sāmoa graduated from Hawai'i Preparatory Academy in Kamuela, HI
27. Roy Helu Washington Redskins RB (running back) born in Danville, CA Tongan
28. Alameda Taamu Arizona Cardinals NT (nose tackle) born in Alameda, CA graduated from Rainier Beach in Seattle, WA
29. Mike Iupati San Francisco 49ers G (guard) born in American Sāmoa and graduated from Western High School in Anaheim, CA
30. Will Tukuafu San Francisco 49ers FB (full back) Salt Lake City, UT Tongan

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